

# AN ARGUMENT FOR METAPHYSICAL REALISM

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**SUMMARY.** This paper presents an argument for metaphysical realism, understood as the claim that the world has structure that would exist even if our cognitive activities never did. The argument is based on the existence of a structured world at a time when it was still possible that we would never evolve. But the interpretation of its premises introduces subtleties: whether, for example, these premises are to be understood as assertions about the world or about our evidence, internally or externally, via assertibility conditions or truth conditions – and what sorts of beings are included in the ‘we’ upon whose cognitions the antirealist supposes the structure of the world to depend. I argue that antirealism can provide no defensible, fully articulated interpretation of the premises that either shows them not to be true or defeats the reasoning.

*Key words:* antirealism, metaphysics, realism

## 1. THE ARGUMENT STATED

Metaphysical realism – ‘realism’, for short – is, as I shall understand it here, the claim that the world has intrinsic structure – structure that would exist even if our cognitive activities didn’t.<sup>1</sup> The denial of this claim is antirealism. Strains of antirealism occur in all major schools of contemporary philosophical thought. Among those who can plausibly be interpreted to have at least sometimes advocated antirealism in this sense are: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Ramsey, Goodman, Putnam, Derrida and Rorty.

Antirealists see *the* world as so thoroughly structured by our concepts, interpretations or values that *none* of its structure would have existed if we had not. But this understanding is false, and to refute it is to show that metaphysical realism is true. That is my aim here. My argument is simple, but its interpretation involves subtleties that will, I think, take us to the heart of the issue. It has only two premises:

- (1) The cosmos existed and had structure before we existed



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and

- (2) During some of this time, it was possible that we would never exist.

From these premises it follows that

- (3) The cosmos has structure that would have existed even if we never had.

Therefore

- (4) The cosmos has structure that is independent of our cognition – i.e., intrinsic structure.

The verb ‘has’ in conclusions (3) and (4) should be understood tenselessly – that is, as meaning ‘has at some past, present or future time’ – for the cosmos is not just what exists now, but the entire history of the universe from beginning (if it has a beginning) to end (if it has an end). Thus (3) and (4) are logically compatible with the claim that all that exists now is shaped by our cognition and so could not exist without us. The argument, if successful, shows only that the cosmos has (tenselessly) intrinsic structure in the sense that it includes ages long ago at which there was structure that would have existed even if we had failed to evolve – the structure, for example, of the first life forms or the ancient stars. Our failure to evolve would, in other words, not retroactively have nullified this structure. Thus what I have in mind by the statement ‘the cosmos has structure that would have existed even if we never had’, can be expressed more explicitly by saying that (a) the cosmos had structure before we evolved and (b) that structure would have existed even if we had never evolved.<sup>2</sup> Of course, it is highly implausible that the cosmos once had intrinsic structure and now has none, so that to establish (4) is tantamount to showing that the cosmos has intrinsic structure *now*. But since (4), understood tenselessly, is sufficient to refute antirealism, it is all that I will argue for here.

## 2. THE ANTIREALIST ‘WE’

Antirealists believe that all world-structure is cognition-dependent. ‘But dependent’, we should ask, ‘upon whose cognition’? The antirealist’s answer is: ours.<sup>3</sup> Precisely. But who are ‘we’? Upon the answer to this question hinges the argument’s meaning and strength.

The antirealist’s first impulse is usually to understand world-structure as the structure in which human experience (either individual or collective) warrants belief at a given time-and hence as dependent in an absurdly simple way on the cognition of ‘us’ *actual humans*. But this makes

the world's structure embarrassingly unstable, given how frequently once-warranted beliefs are replaced by newly warranted beliefs that contradict them. Moreover, since different humans are warranted in widely varying beliefs, it would seem to follow that there are as many worlds as there are mutually incompatible systems of warranted belief. Are we to suppose, then, that we live, not in a universe, but a multiverse whose various component worlds multiply or dissolve depending upon the fluctuating evidential states (and perhaps also conceptions of warrant) of the members of the species *homo sapiens*?

To avoid such dizzyingly pluralistic and anthropocentric implications, antirealists often idealize, defining world-structure as the structure in which belief would be warranted for us humans *if we could make exhaustive inquiries*. This Peircean strategy *might* ameliorate the pluralism, but it is still implausibly anthropocentric; some opinions that could never become warrantable *for us humans* might yet be warrantable for beings better situated or cognitively more adept – because, for example, these opinions concern regions too distant in space or time or are too dangerous for us to hold,<sup>4</sup> too complicated or too boring. Why should the world depend only on *our* cognition and not on theirs too? Recognizing this defect, Hilary Putnam widens his ‘we’ to all ‘creatures with ‘a rational and a sensible nature’’, even if they inhabit portions of the universe completely inaccessible to us.<sup>5</sup> This, however, is no improvement if there are no extraterrestrials, or if they are not sufficiently daring, dogged, intelligent or well-placed to find warrant for opinions that could never be warranted for us. And, even if there are extraterrestrials capable of knowing things we can’t, can we not imagine beings of greater sapience still?

Seeing this, the antirealist may be tempted to idealize still further, maintaining that world-structure is defined not by the opinions that would in the long run be warranted *for us actual cognitive beings* (however broadly we define ‘us’) but by the opinions that would in the long run be warranted *for ideal inquirers* (imaginary cognitive beings who are, for example, omnipresent, invulnerable, never permanently stymied by complexity and never bored). But once we idealize to this extent, the antirealist game is up; for long-term warrant for such *ideal* inquirers is world-structure that could exist apart from the cognition of any actual cognitive beings. If we have to go that far, why not stick with a more straightforward realism? Any interesting form of antirealism, then, requires as its ‘we’, some set of actual beings upon whose cognitive peculiarities the structure of the world is supposed to depend.

Many antirealists simply take ‘we’ to mean ‘we humans’. Their claim is that there would be no world-structure without *human* cognition. Heide-

gger, for example, says that *the* primordial world is Dasein's (the human being's) world and that objectively present or present-at-hand (*vorhanden*) reality is ontologically derivative from it.<sup>6</sup> Others – Frank Ramsey, among them – include animals in their 'we': 'I don't really believe in astronomy', says Ramsey, 'except as a complicated description of a part of the course of human *and possibly animal* sensation' [*Italics mine*].<sup>7</sup> A few – I have already mentioned Putnam – take 'we' to include all rational and sensible creatures.

The argument is very strong if 'we' refers just to human beings; for the independence of the structure of the cosmos from *human* cognition is evident. We know, for example, that a couple of hundred million years ago there were already countless stars, life had long been evolving, and dinosaurs dominated the earth. But at that time it was still possible that human beings would never exist, since our subsequent evolution hinged on an improbable series of events – including an asteroid impact and various mutations and genetic recombinations among our forebears. Some of these (the mutations, especially – but perhaps also the recombinations, which resulted from sexual behavior controlled by minute events in our ancestors' brains) are likely to have been quantum-indeterminate, so that human nonexistence was a genuine *physical* possibility.<sup>8</sup> Hence the cosmos has structure that would have existed even if we humans didn't. But if 'we' refers only to humans, the structure whose existence the argument establishes is intrinsic (i.e., cognition-independent) only in the sense that it is independent of *human* cognition – not, perhaps, of *all* cognition.

The argument is still strong if 'we' includes sentient earthly animals, and less strong but still credible if 'we' includes all sentient life-forms in the universe; for the evolution of life is, to the best of our knowledge, everywhere a relatively late and contingent development.<sup>9</sup>

If, however, 'we' includes nonbiological entities (such as God, if God exists, or nonliving systems if panpsychism is true<sup>10</sup>), then the argument becomes more difficult to assess. But no matter: so broad a sense of 'we' has no place in the debate between realism and antirealism.

What I intend the argument to show, then, is that there exists world-structure that is cognition-independent, not in the absolute sense of being able to exist apart from *any* cognition that there might be, but only in the sense of being able to exist without *our* cognition – where 'our' refers to humans; sentient earthly animals, including humans; or sentient creatures throughout the cosmos.

In the next six sections I will consider objections to the argument. In doing so I will usually leave the first person plural pronouns 'we', 'us'

or ‘our’ ambiguous as among these three meanings, in order to address a broad range of antirealist views.

### 3. THE OBVIOUS ANTIREALIST RESPONSE

How might an antirealist respond to the argument? Nearly all, I think would grant premise (1) (i.e., that the cosmos existed and had structure before *we* existed) – on all the plausible interpretations of ‘we’. But antirealists interpret this premise differently than realists do. They hold that the structure of the ancient cosmos existed not intrinsically but in a way that depends somehow on *our* cognition. Linguistic phenomenologists, for example, see the cosmos as a logical construction of *our* current (actual or possible) sense-data. Antirealistic pragmatists may see it as defined by the ultimate (future) outcome of our scientific inquiry or by *our* criteria of rational acceptability. Heidegger can be understood as regarding it as a product of *our* current manipulative and interpretive activities.<sup>11</sup> Many antirealists therefore suppose that the distant past existence of a structured cosmos requires the present or future existence of cognition – not, of course, as a mysterious backwardly causal force, but rather as a conceptually necessary condition. All the structure of the world – including, presumably, the structure of time itself – depends for its existence, they think, on our cognition. Witness, for example, Nelson Goodman’s response to Israel Scheffler’s assertion that we did not make the stars:

I ask him which features of the stars we did not make, and challenge him to state how these differ from features clearly dependent on discourse. Does he ask how we can have made anything older than we are? Plainly, by making a space and time that contains those stars. ... when I say that worlds are made, I mean it literally ... Surely we make versions, right versions make worlds. And however distinct worlds may be from right versions, making right versions is making worlds.<sup>12</sup>

(Note the characteristic use of the antirealist ‘we’.) Not all antirealists, of course, would agree that we *make* worlds. But because they all see world-structure as dependent in some way on our cognition, they all regard the notion of a structured but never cognized cosmos as radically mistaken, perhaps even unintelligible.

The obvious antirealist response to my argument, therefore, is to reject premise (2), which asserts that during some of the time at which a structured cosmos existed, it was still possible that we (cognitive, or perhaps human, beings) would never exist. This was *not* possible; the antirealist might say, for the existence or possibility of any structured world at all is conceptually dependent upon *our* cognition.

Let's consider, as an illustration of this antirealist response, an antirealist version of linguistic phenomenalism – an obsolete but especially well articulated, hence revealing, view. Linguistic phenomenologists hold that all meaningful statements can be translated into equivalent statements of the form: under such-and-such conditions so-and-so sense-data will appear (where 'such-and-such' and 'so-and-so' are descriptions mentioning only sense-data). An *antirealist* linguistic phenomenologist would hold that sense-data (and possibly the minds that have them) are all that exists and that they could not exist without cognition,<sup>13</sup> so that the cosmos has no *intrinsic* (cognition-independent) structure. Thus, for example, Ramsey thinks of the stars as constructs of human, and possibly animal, sense-data.

Now, like most antirealists, antirealist linguistic phenomenologists would affirm premise (1) – that a structured universe existed before we did. But they would (in theory, at least) interpret this premise as an enormously complicated series of statements expressing the possible sensory evidence for this claim. Part of the evidence that the universe is older than us, for example, comes from comparative carbon-dating of the fossil record. So the statements into which premise (1) is translated might include assertions about the visual sense-data of readouts obtained by applying a properly functioning carbon-dating apparatus to human (or animal) fossils as compared to the sense-data obtained by applying the apparatus to older forms of rock. (Of course, the apparatus, the concept of proper functioning, the fossils, and the rock would all have to be described in pure sense-data language too; and there would be many other sorts of statements expressing additional sensory evidence.)

But the antirealist linguistic phenomenologist will reject premise (2); she will, in other words, deny that there were times at which the cosmos existed and had structure when it was nevertheless possible that we human or cognitive beings would never exist. History and time, she will insist, can only be understood in relation to *our* actual and possible sense-data – that is, in relation to *us*. The great age of the universe consists, she will say, not in some objective expanse of time existing independently of us, but rather in the arrangements of sense – data we will have if we investigate rock strata or use carbon-dating equipment – and in similar sorts of sensory evidence. This can be shown by a logical analysis (translation) of statements about the past into statements about *our* sense-data. Such an analysis, she claims, will demonstrate that the idea of any sort of structure existing in the eternal absence of cognition is useless, empty and perhaps even unintelligible. Therefore premise (2), the claim that before we existed it was possible that we would never exist, is false, or maybe even nonsensical.

This is the obvious way for an antirealist linguistic phenomenalist to resist my argument for realism. Her view is especially well articulated, because it provides definite criteria for its own success; it succeeds if adequate translations can be made and they reveal the falsehood or unintelligibility of premise (2), fails otherwise. Since, as I am about to explain, the translations can't be made, its failure is crisp and conspicuous.

My aim, however, is not to refute linguistic phenomenism – that has been done repeatedly – but to use its failure to illuminate a problem common to many versions of antirealism. Antirealists generally presume that the ancient past is somehow conceptually dependent on *us*. This alleged conceptual dependence is often analogous in some way to the linguistic phenomenist's translations. By considering this analogy carefully for the various forms of antirealism, we can often detect a similar failure to deliver the goods.

Let's review, then, the failure of linguistic phenomenism. The most elaborate effort to formulate translations of the language of science into a language referring only to sense-data is Rudolf Carnap's magnum opus, *The Logical Structure of the World*.<sup>14</sup> Subsequent debate over that work has made it apparent that the translations must fail for several reasons. For one thing, to specify the 'such-and-such conditions required by the translations, we must mention physical objects and circumstances. For example, in trying to give a rough translation of premise (1) awhile back, I had to mention such things as a properly functioning carbon-dating apparatus, human fossils and rocks. If we try to eliminate this mention by further translation, we are off on a vicious regress, since now we must introduce further conditions which mention further physical objects, and so on. A carbon-dating apparatus is, for example, a device for measuring emissions of certain subatomic particles. We cannot adequately describe it without saying what it is for and so mentioning these particles. But the particles themselves are physical objects, which must in turn be described by the entire array of sense-data to which they may give rise when detected in other sorts of apparatus, and so on. The translations can therefore never be completed in actual practice.

Moreover, in specifying the conditions, we must appeal to a broad range of scientific theory, so that the attempt to translate just one statement involves the translation of an enormous body of science. (To specify what it means to say that the carbon-dating apparatus is working properly, for example, I need to describe the relation between its input of radiation and its digital output, which requires a good bit of physics; to say what ancient rocks and human fossils are, I need to bring in elements of geology and physical anthropology.) But then it appears that no interesting statement

can be translated singly – that the translation of any single statement may require the translation of a large body of scientific theory. '[T]he typical statement about bodies has', as W. V. O. Quine knowingly quips, 'no fund of experiential implications it can call its own'.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, there are deep difficulties in creating a language which refers purely to sense-data; for it is doubtful that we can reliably isolate sense-data as elements of 'the given', nor is it clear that we can use language in ways that reliably refer to them.<sup>16</sup>

Linguistic phenomenalism is untenable for all these reasons, and no one advocates it today. Premise (2), the assertion that before we existed it was possible that we would never exist, is clearly not refutable by a linguistic analysis of statements about the physical world into statements about sense-data.

Other forms of antirealism are no better able than linguistic phenomenalism to evade premise (2), though the criteria for their success or failure in doing so are generally murkier. The early Heidegger's objection to premise (2), for example, might go something like this: since objective possibilities and ordinary, objective time are ontologically derived from Dasein's (the human being's) primordial understanding and temporality,<sup>17</sup> the idea of an objective past possibility of the cosmos existing without Dasein is 'free-floating', empty, unreal.<sup>18</sup> Such a response would be based in part upon Heidegger's account of how our understanding of ordinary, objective time is derived by a process of 'leveling down' from our understanding or pragmatic 'world-time', which in turn is derived from our understanding of the 'originary' or 'primordial' temporality of Dasein.<sup>19</sup>

But this account is in detail no more workable than the linguistic phenomenalist's attempt to translate statements about past events into statements about our sense data. It fails, as William D. Blattner has recently argued, even at the first step, when Heidegger tries to derive the sequence of moments characteristic of pragmatic world-time from the hierarchy of goals (the 'for-the-sake-of-which') of originary temporality.<sup>20</sup> There is, as Blattner shows, no plausible way to account for the former in terms of the latter. The result is the collapse of what Blattner calls 'Heidegger's temporal idealism'.<sup>21</sup>

Of course not all antirealists are willing to back their claims with such detailed analysis. Some prefer the pre-emptive tactic of dissuading us from ideas that they regard as making no practical difference in our lives or as trapping us, like flies, in a metaphysical bottle.<sup>22</sup> Such antirealists might attack premise (2), not by offering a positive account of the conceptual connection between the past and our present or future experience, but by dismissing this premise as pointless, meaningless or uninteresting. The prob-



lem is that premise (2) – especially when ‘we’ is interpreted as referring to human beings – is not meaningless metaphysical nonsense, but a substantial empirical claim reasonably well supported by the evidence. Without an incisive positive account of what is wrong with (2), such charges are empty air.

#### 4. ANTISCIENTIFIC RESPONSES

My argument need not perturb an antiscientific antirealist, who by rejecting the science on which the premises are based can still maintain a consistent antirealism. Nietzsche, for example, though usually deferential toward the physics of his day, occasionally entertained radically innovative hypotheses about the structure of reality. Here, in a rough sketch from his notebooks, is one such proposal:

The apparent world, i.e., a world viewed according to values; ordered, selected according to values, i.e., in this case according to the viewpoint of utility in regard to the preservation and enhancement of the power of a certain species of animal.

The perspective therefore decides the character of the ‘appearance’! As if a world would still remain over after one deducted the perspective! By doing that one would deduct relativity!

Every center of force adopts a perspective toward the entire remainder, i.e., its own particular valuation, mode of action, and mode of resistance. The ‘apparent world’, therefore, is reduced to a specific mode of action on the world, emanating from a center.

Now there is no other mode of action whatever; and the ‘world’ is only a word for the totality of these actions. Reality consists precisely in this particular action and reaction of every individual part toward the whole – <sup>23</sup>

Nietzsche’s idea is to replace the physical world-picture with a metaphysics of perspectival centers of force, modeled, apparently, on human consciousness. Somehow these centers of ‘force’ jointly constitute or construct the world from the totality of their perspectival experiences. There is no transcendent or noumenal world apart from them. Each person, in this world-picture, is the center of her own world; there may even be multiple centers, corresponding to multiple drives, within a single person.<sup>24</sup> This idea contradicts premise (1) – that the cosmos existed and had structure before we existed, if ‘we’ is interpreted as referring to these centers.

But this hypothesis is not even half-baked. In what sort of ‘space’ do these ‘centers’ exist? By what means do they interpret and reinterpret, act upon and resist one another? What is the nature of their force? What are they perspectives of? To answer these questions clearly is either to posit some kind of intrinsic structure or to show in detail by some kind of logical construction or phenomenological analysis how the answers to these questions emerge from the facts of human cognition. To evade them is leave

the idea so inchoate that it can have no force against premises (1) and (2). Similar criticisms apply to any antiscientific dismissal of the argument that I can think of.

A hard determinist might also deny (2). The cosmos was so ordered from the beginning, she might argue, that *our* development was inevitable. But so thoroughgoing a determinism sits uneasily with antirealism – and, as noted above, it seems, given the facts of evolution and quantum mechanics, to be false. Yet even if it were at all times physically impossible for us not to evolve, our not evolving was at least logically possible, which is all the argument requires. For (2)'s function in the argument is merely to ensure that (3) is not vacuously true – that is, true merely because our nonexistence is not possible in any sense.<sup>25</sup>

##### 5. ACCEPTING BUT REINTERPRETING THE ARGUMENT

But can't an antirealist deflate the argument by *accepting* it all and yet consistently understanding it in an antirealistic way?<sup>26</sup> Such a maneuver could have force only if the antirealist did not reinterpret my words too drastically. Any sentence can be reinterpreted to mean anything; but this Alice-in-Wonderland game quickly becomes tedious and puerile. The sense in which the antirealist understands my words must be a reasonable analysis of the sense that I gave them; otherwise her reinterpretation is merely an irrelevant change of subject.

One non-frivolous way for an antirealist to reinterpret the argument is to understand its assertions in terms of their assertibility conditions, rather than their truth conditions. This is an idea pioneered by John Dewey and later championed by Michael Dummett.<sup>27</sup> Roughly, it can be effected by understanding each sentence of the argument as if it were prefixed by something like the phrase, 'Judged by our criteria of rational acceptability, our experience warrants the assertion that ....'<sup>28</sup> Thus the conclusion of the argument would be: 'Judged by our criteria of rational acceptability, our experience warrants the assertion that the cosmos has intrinsic structure' – which is, sure enough, not a realistic assertion. But antirealists (by definition) *deny* that the cosmos has intrinsic structure. So such an antirealist (who *ex hypothesi* accepts the argument) denies what according to the argument experience warrants, based on her own criteria of rational acceptability. *By her own standards* this is irrational.

There are, no doubt, other ways for an antirealist to accept the entire argument and yet reinterpret it antirealistically. I cannot anticipate and respond to all possible reinterpretations of this sort. But I can think of no such reinterpretation that does not either (a) change the subject and

so fail to consider *my* argument or (b) embody, like the reinterpretation just considered, a paradoxical or irrational stance toward the existence of intrinsic structure. For any such reinterpretation requires the antirealist (who denies that there could have been a structured cosmos without us) to accept (in some sense of ‘accept’) the conclusion that there could have been a structured cosmos without us. I will consider one further example of type (b): Hilary Putnam’s internal realism.

## 6. PUTNAM’S INTERNAL REALISM

In the late 1970s and 1980s, Putnam articulated a form of antirealism that he described as “rejecting ‘realism’ in the name of the realistic spirit”,<sup>29</sup> and which he called (paradoxically) internal *realism*. Though he has since shifted back in the direction of realism,<sup>30</sup> his antirealism remains influential and hence worthy of consideration. He uses the adjective ‘internal’ to distinguish his antirealistic view from his still earlier *external* or *metaphysical* realism.<sup>31</sup> The terms ‘internal’ and ‘external’ describe the respective conceptions of reference. External realism sees reference as a relation between words and intrinsic world-structures, which the internalist Putnam conceives as akin to Kantian things-in-themselves; reference thus extends to something ‘external’ to our understanding and collective experience. Internal realism sees reference as a relation between words and objects *as conceptualized by us*, things wholly within the realm of our understanding.

External realists think that terms like ‘star’ refer to world-structures that are determinate independently of our conceptualization – even though we might not know exactly what those structures are. Internal realists think that such reference relations, if they existed, would be not only unintelligible but miraculous. How could we make words behave like *that*? For the internal realist, it is a mere tautology that ‘star’ refers to stars – but to stars as conceived and understood by us, not as they are ‘in themselves’.

When Putnam speaks of the ‘world’ or the ‘empirical world’, what he has in mind is the subject of this story, *qua* subject of this story – a thing that can exist only if the story exists.<sup>32</sup> The story is the set of statements that are acceptable, given our experiences, by our ‘criteria of rational acceptability’ – the common-sense social and scientific practices we use to determine which statements it is rational to believe and which it is rational to reject. It is rational, for example, by the criteria of contemporary western culture, to accept statements generated by careful scientific investigation, but not the pronouncements of spiritualists, shamans, or psychics. The empirical world therefore contains quarks and quasars but not angels or astral bodies.

‘Human minds did not create the stars’, says Putnam, but, he adds, “this ‘flat’ remark is hardly enough to settle the philosophical question of realism versus antirealism”.<sup>33</sup> Though we did not create the stars (we lack backwardly causative powers), still the existence of the stars is in a sense, Putnam thinks, conceptually dependent on us, for the term ‘stars’ refers not externally, to intrinsic structures of a cognition-independent world, but internally, to objects of our current (or perhaps ultimate) scientific story.

Since this story consists of those statements that are (or will ultimately be) warranted by our criteria of rational acceptability, and since premises (1) and (2) of the argument are so warranted, Putnam would, I think, accept these premises; and, of course, he would interpret the references of their terms internally. Now it follows from premises (1) and (2) that a structured cosmos could have existed even if we never did.<sup>34</sup> Yet since we are interpreting these premises internally, the term ‘cosmos’ must refer to what Putnam calls the *empirical* world – the subject of our scientific story – or at least to some aspect of it. Hence (1) and (2) imply that the empirical world could have existed even if we never did. But this is just what the internalist denies. Internalism entails that ‘the empirical world depends upon our criteria of rational acceptability’; that is, ‘we must have criteria of rational acceptability to even have an empirical world’.<sup>35</sup> But we must exist in order to have criteria of rational acceptability.<sup>36</sup> Hence, interpreted internally, the internalist claim that the empirical world could *not* have existed if we never did contradicts premises (1) and (2), similarly interpreted. Internalism is therefore internally unacceptable; if added as a hypothesis to the scientific story, it yields a contradiction. Is internalism, then, to be understood *externally*?<sup>37</sup> But internalism rejects external claims as nonsense. Therefore either way – whether understood internally or externally – Putnam’s internalism entails absurdities.<sup>38</sup>

Interestingly, these absurdities can be interpreted as the result of a translation problem akin to the translation problems of linguistic phenomenalism. The problem, specifically, is to reinterpret the argument’s key terms – ‘cosmos’, ‘structure’, ‘times’, ‘before’, etc. – so that they refer not to intrinsically structured things but to things as structured only according to our criteria of rational acceptability – to ‘translate’, in other words, realist language (my language) into an internalist language. The question, then, is whether this ‘translation’ can successfully be implemented.

Internalists would reject this characterization of the problem, of course, for they think that only internalist language is genuinely meaningful and that realist language is unintelligible. (Just so, an antirealist phenomenalist might disparage realistic talk about the physical world.) For the internalist, then, it is less a task of translating than of finding meanings

for the metaphysical nonsense I am speaking. But since I regard my way of speaking as intelligible, I will persist in characterizing the process as translation.

The internalist's 'translation' has one important advantage over the phenomenalist's: it is homophonic; the internalist language and mine contain, sentence-for-sentence exactly the same words in the same syntactical arrangement. The two languages differ only semantically – that is, in the meanings they assign to the words. Therefore there is no formidable technical task, as there was for linguistic phenomenalism, of matching disparate syntactic structures. Syntactically, the translation is trivial.

But semantically it is arcane. The problem is analogous to the phenomenalist's problem of transforming ordinary statements about into statements about sense-data – only for the internalist, what we are supposed to be referring to are not sense-data but things-as-structured-by-our-criteria-of-rational-acceptability. Consider again, for example, how we are to interpret the term 'cosmos' in premise (1): the cosmos existed and had structure before we existed. For the internalist, this term cannot refer to a world that could exist without our cognition. At best, it can refer to what Putnam calls the empirical world – or some aspect of it. But there is a natural sense in which the empirical world did not exist before we did. If we interpret the words 'existed and had structure before we existed' in this natural sense, then premise (1), which is rationally acceptable and so should be acceptable to the internalist, is false. So the internalist must reinterpret the words 'existed and had structure before we existed' accordingly. Specifically, it must turn out that the empirical world existed before we did in a sense of 'before' that is internal to the empirical world. This reinterpretation would be analogous to the phenomenalist's attempt to analyze statements about the past or about temporal relationships into statements about our actual or possible sense data. But exactly how is it to proceed? If it is to preserve the truth of the premises (which are part of our scientific story and hence part of what define the empirical world according to internalism), then it must preserve the truth of the conclusion. But how are we to interpret the conclusion in a way that does not contradict internalism? Nothing is obvious here. Internalist 'translation', though syntactically trivial, is a semantic morass. It seems no more likely to succeed than phenomenalist translation.

## 7. REJECTING THE QUESTION

One needn't, of course, be either a realist or an antirealist. One can, for example, simply refuse to consider whether the world has any cognition-independent structure. Richard Rorty, who in the late 1970s and 1980s was

one of the staunchest defenders of antirealism, has since retreated to this middle ground:

Lately I have been trying to mark out a position that does not take sides between subject and object, mind and world, but instead tries to erase the contrast between them. I have, so to speak, been trying to lose *both* us and the world. ... I want to stop using the us-world contrast, and thus to get rid of the realism-antirealism issue. ... [A]s I (now, at least) see the matter, the picture of the mind projecting structure onto an unstructured world is just as bad as the idea of the world projecting structure onto, or into, language. I should like to ... reject the question Which comes first, subject or object? This means rejecting the question Whose contours were there first? Language's or the world's?<sup>39</sup>

One *can* reject the question 'Whose contours were there first, language's or the world's?' but this seems to me no less disingenuous than rejecting the question, 'Which came first, humans or the stars?' for it, no less than the latter question, is empirical, and it has an equally well confirmed answer.

Indeed, the answer is *so* obvious (language plainly evolved as a way for organisms to deal with the exigencies of the world) that it is difficult not to suppose that Rorty is referring to some more esoteric question. But what could that question be? Antirealism does imply that a structured world could not exist if we did not, so that in that sense *our* (Rorty would prefer to say *language's*) 'contours' were there, if not *first* (since there is no temporal order without time), then at the origin (in some other sense of origin) of things. What, apart from this implication, *could* Rorty be talking about?

In any case, refusing to have an opinion – or, more precisely, rejecting the terms of the discourse – is of no avail. If I reject the us-stars distinction and so refuse to have an opinion on the question of whether we or the stars came first, all I have accomplished is to remove myself from certain conversations. It is optimism to hope that I can thereby 'get rid of the issue'.

## 8. GOODMAN'S CHALLENGE

Despite their repeated failure to show exactly how the structure of the ancient past can depend on *our* cognition, many antirealists are committed to the view that *somehow* it must. But what good is this perennial faith against the evidence supporting premises (1) and (2)?

Seeing this disadvantage, the antirealist may attempt to shift the burden of proof, as Goodman did with Scheffler: 'I ask him which features of the stars we did not make, and challenge him to state how these differ from

features clearly dependent on discourse'. This retort may take us aback momentarily, but it is easily met.

One is tempted, of course, to begin at once naming characteristics of stars – their age, mass, composition, etc., that we could have had nothing to do with producing. But to try to *name* the features of the stars that we did not make is to fall into Goodman's trap, for Goodman will simply respond that 'age', 'mass' and 'composition' and the like are schemata that we impose on the universe in attempting to interpret or understand it. There will follow a tedious and inconclusive discussion of the distinction between concept and object, with Goodman maintaining that there are no concept-independent objects.

Goodman's challenge can perhaps best be answered, then, not by *nam-ing* features of the stars that we did not make, but by indicating the role they play in our experience. Note first that while it is true that our understanding of objects is always mediated by concepts, it is *not* true that the objects themselves make no contribution to our understanding. It is not concepts all the way down. Some understandings interpose fewer layers of symbol and interpretation between us and the objects themselves than others. If I gaze into a clear night sky at the star fields toward the center of the Milky Way galaxy, I will have a more intimate acquaintance with them than if I see them only in a glossy photograph on page 147 of my Freshman Astronomy text.

Moreover, though in all meaningful perception there is interpretation, there is also something that we do not create and cannot change by our conceptions. When we look at the night sky, for example, we find the stars positioned in arrangements not of our making. These arrangements are among the sorts of things that G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell and others tried to distill out of the flux of interpretation and reify as sense-data – the uninterpreted given in perception. They failed. Such arrangements must be interpreted even to be recognized as sense-data and so cannot be isolated from flux of interpretation. But that does not mean that the way they appear to us is *only* the result, for example, of our engaging in a certain kind of discourse, or even of the kinds of eyes and brains we have. Indigo buntings, beings with alien eyes and strange brains and with whom we have never had any discourse, recognize the same arrangements of stars that we do. (These night-migrating birds guide their flight by the arrangements of the north circumpolar stars, as is known from experiments in planetariums in which the arrangements of the stars – as conceived by us – are simulated and varied.<sup>40</sup>) We may *reinterpret* the arrangements of the stars, we may 'form' them conceptually into different gestalts: various constellations on the celestial sphere, specks of brightness in our visual fields, suns in deep

three-dimensional space, local field-densities in spacetime, but this malleability is limited; there is an arrangement, a matter, a structure that persists and must be accounted for through all our reinterpretations.

Antirealists know this but they downplay it. Note the downplaying in this excerpt from Putnam:

Internalism does not deny that there are experiential *inputs* to knowledge; knowledge is not a story with no constraints except *internal* coherence; but it does deny that there are any inputs *which are not themselves to some extent shaped by our concepts* ...<sup>41</sup>

*To some extent* – but what about the remainder – the common structure perceived by beings as different as humans and indigo buntings? Granted, we and the birds see and conceive differently, and neither of us sees the stars as they are in themselves. But they see – and, what is more, navigate by – some of the same concept-independent structures that we do.

## 9. CONCLUSION

The existence of an ancient cosmos in which it was possible that we would never evolve has never been adequately explained – antirealists – who hold that all world-structure (past, present and future) somehow depends conceptually on *us*. I have tried to show that *we* (whoever we are) are not *that* big a deal.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Many other versions of realism have been discussed. Devitt [1984], secs. 2.3–2.4, mentions, among others, these three: a minimal form which asserts only that *something* exists independently of our cognition but is not committed to this *something's* being structured, a more moderate version which asserts the existence of some intrinsically structured set of entities, and a common-sense version which asserts the existence of ordinary things, like rocks and trees. The minimal version, as Devitt, quoting Goodman, points out, is so uninteresting as to be ‘not worth fighting for’ (p. 15). My definition is closest to the second version, though I do not insist that the structure be a definite ‘set of entities’, for structure, as I understand it, is variously interpretable (a tree, for example, is a single organism, but also a complex of relationships, an aggregate of events, etc.). Even realism this weak seems at least sometimes to have been rejected by the philosophers mentioned in the paragraph to which this footnote is attached and so is sufficiently contentious to be worth defending. Yet while rocks and trees surely exist, it is not so obvious that their existence *as rocks and trees* is independent of our cognition. I, at any rate, I will not here defend the claim that our ways of categorizing them correspond to the world’s intrinsic structures. I will not, in other words, defend common sense realism, but only the more modest version that I have defined.

<sup>2</sup> The logical or semantic framework I have in mind for the interpretation of part (b) is



that of David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* [1973]. To evaluate (b) in this framework is, roughly, to imagine the world altered minimally so that we never existed and ask whether under such minimal alterations (e.g., various plausible disruptions of evolutionary history) that structure (which existed before we evolved) would still have existed.

<sup>3</sup> My definition of antirealism – as the view that no structure at all would exist without *our* cognition – excludes those forms of idealism, such as Berkeley's, that make all structure depend upon God's cognition. To believe in such a God is to be a metaphysical realist in my sense, since God is a structured entity independent of *our* cognition.

<sup>4</sup> I have in mind Nietzsche's observation in *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 39, that 'Something might be true while being harmful and dangerous in the highest degree. Indeed, it might be a basic characteristic of existence that those who would know it completely would perish'.

<sup>5</sup> Even, that is, if they live outside our light cone – i.e., so separated from us in spacetime that no signal travelling at the speed of light or slower could pass from us to them or them to us. Such beings could cognize regions of spacetime that are inaccessible to our cognition. See Putnam [1990], p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger uses the term 'world' in a special sense, to mean roughly the world of one's concerns; one's 'world' in this sense is structured by one's own and others' purposes; it is a context of equipment, of things *ready-to-hand* [*Being and Time*, pp. 63–89; German pagination] and is 'essentially related to Dasein' [*The Essence of Reasons*, p. 85]. The world in the objective, scientific sense – what Heidegger calls the *present-at-hand* (*vorhanden*) world, or Reality – is 'discovered and defined' by disregarding this structure of purpose (*Being and Time*, p. 70; cf. pp. 356–64). But '*Readiness-to-hand is the way in which entities as they are 'in themselves' are defined ontologico-categorially*' (*ibid.*, p. 71; italics are Heidegger's). Hence 'Reality is ontologically grounded in the Being of Dasein', though 'this does not signify that only when Dasein exists and as long as Dasein exists, can the Real be as that which in itself it is' (*ibid.*, pp. 211–12). But Heidegger's voluminous and often obscure writings leave plenty of room for varying interpretations. Trish Glazebrook [2001], for example, has recently set forth an interpretation according to which Heidegger is a scientific realist. But this is not the place to debate Heideggerian ontology. Suffice it to say that even if Heidegger himself was a realist, many interpreters have taken him not to be; and the antirealism often ascribed to him is worth refuting whether or not it was his view.

<sup>7</sup> Ramsey [1950], p. 291.

<sup>8</sup> It might be objected that the universe could not have had structure without us because without some kind of consciousness to collapse wave functions, the cosmos would have remained in an enormously complex array of superposed states. Even if this interpretation is tenable, however, the superposed states would themselves be intrinsic structure. The universe, therefore, still has at least the sort of intrinsic structure defined by the Schrödinger wave equation.

<sup>9</sup> The main worry here is along the lines of an anthropic principle – namely that in a universe structured like ours it might be physically necessary that some form of animate life evolve. That would defeat premise (2), but in a way that would not help the antirealist.

<sup>10</sup> See Chalmers [1996], pp. 293–301.

<sup>11</sup> Specifically the thematizing of a primordially ready-to-hand (practical) world into a world present-at-hand (a theoretical world with an objective history); see *Being and Time*, pp. 356–64.

<sup>12</sup> Goodman [1980]. It is, of course, not at all plain that we make the space and time that contain the stars, and in [1966], Goodman himself had begged off explaining how the

construction is supposed to go. Nor did he give an account of it in any of his later works.

<sup>13</sup> The belief that sense-data or something like them exist without cognition is form of *realism*. A phenomenalist who assumes that something like sense-data exist uncognized will think of objects as something like Mill's 'groups of permanent possibilities of sensation' or Russell's aggregates of 'sensibilia', which can exist without being data to any mind (see Russell [1981]). But such a phenomenalist is a realist. Similarly, any linguistic phenomenalist who believes in uncognized universals (numbers, sets, properties, etc.) in addition to sense data is a realist.

<sup>14</sup> Carnap [1969]. In the original work, Carnap takes as his basic elements what he calls 'elementary experiences'; but in the 1961 preface to the second edition (p. vii), he says that if he were to rewrite it he would use 'concrete sense data' as basic elements. Unfortunately, Carnap does not discuss the analysis of statements about the distant past in this work, but his program clearly fails even for present-tense statements about the physical world.

<sup>15</sup> Quine [1969].

<sup>16</sup> For a more complete discussion of the reasons for the failure of the translations, see Quine [1969]. The problem about what constitutes sense-data or 'the given' is instructively raised in Wilfrid Sellars [1956]. The problem of reference was raised most notoriously by Wittgenstein in his celebrated ruminations about private languages (*Philosophical Investigations*, part I, secs. 243 ff.).

<sup>17</sup> See *Being and Time*, pp. 143–4 and 411–26.

<sup>18</sup> In [1961], p. 71, he calls this a 'pure' possibility and adds:

But strictly speaking we cannot say: There was a time when man *was* not. At all *times* man was and is and will be, because time produces itself only insofar as man *is*. ... time fashions itself into a time only as human, historical being-there (*Dasein*).

<sup>19</sup> *Being and Time*, pp. 406–428.

<sup>20</sup> [1999], pp. 181–184.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, chs. 4 and 5.

<sup>22</sup> The image is Wittgenstein's, but neopragmatists – Rorty in particular – are fond of it.

<sup>23</sup> *Will to Power*, sec. 567; see also *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 36.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, *Will to Power*, sec. 481.

<sup>25</sup> More particularly, I am referring to what I called above part (b) of (3), namely:

The cosmos' ancient structure would have existed even if we had never evolved.

For a discussion of counterfactual conditionals with vacuous antecedents, see Lewis [1973], pp. 24–26.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Aquila raised this objection when I presented this material to the Philosophy Department at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Dummett [1979], especially chs. 1 and 10.

<sup>28</sup> This is too simple, really. From a logical point of view what is needed is a recursive reinterpretation of such statements using an intuitionist semantics. But the details of the semantics do not affect the point I am making in this paragraph.

<sup>29</sup> [1990], p. 42.

<sup>30</sup> Specifically, he has come to accept the possibility 'recognition-transcendent' truth. See Putnam [1994a].

<sup>31</sup> See Putnam [1981], ch. 3., [1994a] and [1994b].

<sup>32</sup> More specifically, I think that what he has in mind, is something like a model, or perhaps a range of models, (in the model-theoretic sense) of this story.

<sup>33</sup> [1990] p. 30.

<sup>34</sup> This is a slightly different conclusion than the one I drew in my argument, but it follows

nonetheless.

<sup>35</sup> Putnam [1981], p. 134.

<sup>36</sup> Reason, says Putnam, is ‘not to be found outside of concrete language games and institutions’ [‘Why Reason Can’t Be Naturalized’, Putnam [1983], p. 234]. But it would not help the internalist to posit some ideal notion of reason that is entirely independent of us either, for such an ideal would constitute cognition-independent and hence *external* structure.

<sup>37</sup> There may appear to be another option. Internalism might be understood as a meta-story – a story about the scientific story that is not itself part of the scientific story. Thus it would in a sense be neither internal nor external; its references would be interpreted as internal to *its* story, but not to the scientific one. But while a metatheory ought at least to be consistent with its object theory (and may even contain it), that is not the case here. The move to a meta-story does not dissolve the contradiction but merely separates its components into different stories, breaking our understanding into mutually incoherent fragments. If internalism forces such a desperate move upon us, that alone is reason enough to reject it.

<sup>38</sup> It would not help to reply that two sorts of possibility are at issue – the physical possibility, say, that a structured world could exist even if we never did as expressed in premise (2), as opposed to the conceptual or metaphysical *impossibility* of this state of affairs, which is implied by internalism. For if this state of affairs is conceptually or metaphysically impossible, then it is physically impossible (since physical possibility implies both conceptual and metaphysical possibility), and so the contradiction stands.

<sup>39</sup> Rorty [1995].

<sup>40</sup> Robin Rees, ed., *The Way Nature Works* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), p. 231.

<sup>41</sup> Putnam [1981], p. 54.

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